DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 525 CE 073 924

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| TITLE | Building School-to-Work Systems in Rural Areas. Resource Bulletin. |
| INSTITUTION | National School-to-Work Opportunities Office, Washington, DC. |
| PUB DATE | Dec 96 |
| NOTE | 6p. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | National School-to-Work Office, 400 Virginia Avenue, S.W., Room 210, Washington, DC 20024; 800-251-7236; fax: 202-401-6211; World Wide Web: http://www.stw.ed.gov. |
| PUB TYPE | Information Analyses (070) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Community Services; Computer Science Education; Demonstration Programs; *Education Work Relationship; *Entrepreneurship; *Networks; *Partnerships in Education; *Rural Areas; Rural Schools; Secondary Education; Service Learning; Technological Advancement; Technology Education; Vocational Education; Work Experience Programs |

ABSTRACT

This bulletin describes practitioner-identified strategies that can help build effective school-to-work systems in rural areas. The first section highlights these strategies for rural school-to-work partnerships: start early; identify educational and economic opportunities in the community; entrepreneurial experiences; community service-learning; computer/technology skills; and build networks among rural schools. Three examples of effective practices are presented: in Rothsay, Minnesota, a community's drive to save its independent school system and reopen its closed hardware store that led to the school board's purchase of the store and replace the high school's business simulation class with the opportunity to run a real business; REAL Enterprises in Oklahoma, a nonprofit organization formed to help rural schools create innovative entrepreneurial education programs; and training students at Rock Creek High School in St. George, Kansas, to install and troubleshoot the school district's computer systems. Contact and address information for the programs is provided. The bulletin then lists six organizations that can provide further information on the topic. Brief summaries describe the organizations' focus and activities. Five resource publications are listed. (YLB)

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SCHOOL TO WORK OPPORTUNITIES

★RESOURCE BULLETIN

DECEMBER 1996

# Building School-to-Work Systems in Rural Areas

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act provides a framework for building statewide systems to improve students' transition from school to the workplace. Building a school-to-work system that serves all students throughout a state entails working with school systems in diverse geographic areas, each with their own strengths and challenges. Rural communities and schools occupy an important position in the effort to link school and work and expand economic opportunities for all students. Rural populations are found in every state throughout the country, and make up over forty percent of our nation's workforce. School-to-work systems can help to ensure the vital contribution of these communities and their schools to the nation's economy.

Rural communities face significant economic and demographic challenges. Shifting employment patterns in the global economy have caused significant levels of poverty in rural areas, and many rural schools have a limited capacity to adapt to the changing economy. The economies of rural communities are often focused on one industry, such as manufacturing or farming, and individuals not interested in those careers may have limited career paths and opportunities for work-based learning experiences. As a result, many students leave their communities upon completing high school or college to move to communities with more job opportunities. In addition to the economic challenges facing rural communities, geographic isolation and limited educational resources pose a problem in building school-to-work systems. Students may have a difficult time researching or obtaining information for class or career development activities due to limited library resources.

In response to these challenges, practitioners have identified the following strategies that can help build effective school-to-work systems in rural areas. Additional resources and organizations follow these strategies, providing further information that can assist in the design and implementation of school-to-work systems in rural communities.

## Strategies for Rural School-to-Work Partnerships

**Start early.** In many rural communities, students often think their only pathway to success is to leave their community upon completing their education. Rural school-to-work partnerships can work to show students and their families that there are ample opportunities for success in their own communities, and that school-to-work can help develop these opportunities. In addition, incorporating school-to-work principles as early as kindergarten and elementary school helps students begin to develop responsibility, confidence, and teamwork skills and promotes awareness of a broad range of careers.

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**Identify educational and economic opportunities in the community.** If students are trained and prepared for occupations that exist or can be improved upon in their communities, they will be more likely to remain instead of leaving for jobs elsewhere. School-to-work systems can help students and community leaders identify the existing and potential opportunities for economic growth and work-based learning experiences by undertaking an analysis of community strengths and needs. Students and community leaders can identify opportunities for improving existing businesses; potential opportunities for entrepreneurship and small business development; and public sector jobs and community service initiatives that can provide a variety of work-based learning experiences. In this process, students learn how to make practical use of data collection and analysis, while building knowledge of the community. School-to-work systems can then help prepare students to take advantage of these opportunities, fulfilling their educational needs and helping build community economic development.

**Entrepreneurial experiences.** Many rural school-to-work initiatives emphasize the effectiveness of entrepreneurial activities in rural areas. The community analysis described earlier can help students identify and establish businesses that actually create jobs and meet community needs. Learning how to establish and run a business provides immediate relevance to students' school experience, can create additional economic activity in a community, and is a lifelong skill that continues to pay benefits. But these school-based entrepreneurial activities must make certain to supplement, rather than threaten, established local businesses. Competition between area businesses and student-run businesses that are often subsidized can create animosity and damage school-community relations.

**Community service-learning.** Rural school-to-work partnerships can also utilize community service learning experiences in the work-based learning component of school-to-work. Service learning projects help meet community needs and provide students with hands-on learning experiences that allow them to use the academic skills being developed in the classroom. For example, environmental projects provide students an opportunity to develop and apply their knowledge of math, science, environmental studies, and civics, while promoting a sense of responsibility for the environment and return to the community.

**Computer/technology skills.** Many rural school-to-work initiatives emphasize the critical role of technology in assisting rural partnerships prepare students for lifelong learning and success. Technology helps rural communities overcome their geographic isolation by providing them with access to information from all over the world. As a result, the effective use of technology "evens the playing field" between rural and urban or suburban communities by ensuring that students in rural areas have equal access to a wealth of information and opportunities. Through the Internet, students have been able to obtain not only research but also assistance from educators and professionals throughout the world. Many schools have helped students design and develop their own home pages, or the school home page, providing an opportunity for students to learn a marketable skill while in school. Other technologies available for rural schools include: distance learning and telecommunication technologies, e-mail, interactive television, electronic bulletin boards, and other information networks.

**Build networks among rural schools.** Networks among rural schools can help synthesize and disseminate information and methods of building school-to-work partnerships in rural areas. Newsletters,



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conference calls, and electronic bulletin boards can all facilitate the formation of networks among rural schools. Organizations such as the National Rural and Small Schools Network and the National Rural Education Association provide educators, administrators, and staff an opportunity to exchange information with other small and rural schools.

## Effective Practices

In **Rothsay, Minnesota**, a community's drive to save its independent school system and its business spurred the school board to purchase and reopen the closed hardware store, replacing the high school's business simulation class with the opportunity to run a real business. The hardware store became a profit-making enterprise that engages students in all aspects of its operations. The operation is overseen by a business teacher who serves as the store's general manager.

Seniors can work one school period each weekday in the hardware store for academic credit. The students rotate among jobs, building skills in database management, spreadsheet applications, accounting, payroll, inventory, and marketing. These work-based experiences are linked to school-based learning through accounting and business management classes. Student learning in the workplace is measured in two formal ways. At least once a quarter, students take a written exam addressing basic questions about store operations, such as preparing purchase orders and daily accounting procedures. In addition, once a week, the instructor completes a ten-item evaluation for each student on such items as appearance, cooperation, and respect. Students rate themselves on the same form and evaluate their performance with the teacher. In addition to their success with the hardware store, a student-run corporation, Tiger, Inc., has taken over operations of the town's only grocery store, and students have worked with Habitat for Humanity and private investors to build several houses in the area, providing additional avenues for students to experience entrepreneurship and leadership.

**REAL Enterprises** is a non-profit organization formed to help rural schools create innovative entrepreneurship education programs. REAL provides technical assistance, training, and other support services to help teachers offer entrepreneurship programs to students. A REAL initiative operating in four Oklahoma panhandle high schools--Forgan, Beaver, Balko, and Turpin--uses interactive technology to simultaneously transmit the REAL entrepreneurial class over fiber-optic lines to each of the other three schools. The teacher of the entrepreneurial class spends a day in each of the schools instructing and transmitting from that site. Class paperwork, including tests and required business plans developed by students, are sent to the teacher via fax. In addition to the REAL class, the interactive technology has also allowed the schools to provide arts and language courses in the four schools that otherwise would not have been available.

Students at **Rock Creek High School** in St. George, Kansas, have utilized the school district's computer systems as a work-based learning opportunity. The district technology specialist trains the students in hardware, troubleshooting, and installation. Students have installed 30 new PCs in the computer lab, including the network, and have installed CD-ROMs on 15 other school computers. The students also maintain the computer system throughout the district, assisting with hardware problems, and helping faculty and administrators with software applications. District personnel in need of technical support can contact students through the E-mail system.



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FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS TOPIC, CONSULT THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES:

**Rothsay High School:** Pat Conn, Box 247, 123 2nd Street, NW, Rothsay, MN 56579 ★ (218) 867-2735.

**REAL Enterprises:** Paul Delargy, 295 East Dougherty Street, Suite 202, Athens, GA 30603 ★ (706) 546-9061.

**Rock Creek Jr. Sr. High School**: Frankie Sumners, 9355 Flush Road, St. George, KS 66535 ★ (913) 484-8591.

## Organizations

**ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools**, located at the Appalachia Educational Laboratory, acquires, processes, and abstracts documents and articles for the ERIC database in the areas of American Indian and Alaska Native education, Mexican American education, migrant education, outdoor education, rural education, and small schools. P.O. Box 1348, Charleston WV 25325 ★ (800) 624-9120.

**Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory**, a non-profit organization funded, in part, by the U.S. Department of Education, has focused on improving rural education for the 93 percent of the schools in the Mid-Continent region that are rural and/or small. 12500 E. Iliff Avenue, Suite 210 Aurora, CO 80014 ★ (303) 337-0990.

**National Future Farmers of America Organization** is dedicated to making a positive difference in the lives of young people by developing their potential for leadership, personal growth, and career success through agricultural education and FFA. Student members are preparing for careers in agricultural marketing, processing, communications, education, horticulture, production, natural resources forestry and agribusiness. 5632 Mt. Vernon Memorial Highway, P.O. Box 15160, Alexandria, VA 22309-0160 ★ (703) 360-3600.

**National Rural and Small Schools Network** is sponsored, in part, by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. The purposes of the network are to: (1) provide a forum for members to discuss and exchange information about rural and small schools; (2) develop a national network through which rural and small schools, regardless of geographic location, are given a voice; and (3) promote the value and role of rural and small schools in the education system. P.O. Box 4008, Star City, WV 26504-4008 ★ (304) 599-8919.

**National Rural Education Association** (NREA) is the oldest unified voice for rural education in America. The goals of the NREA are to further the improvement of educational opportunities for all children in rural areas and to serve as the national advocate for rural schools and rural education programs in America. 230 Education Bldg., Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523-0001 ★ (303) 491-7022.

**REAL Enterprises** was created to help rural schools develop innovative entrepreneurship education programs that result in school-incubated enterprises. REAL seeks to stimulate small business development,

create jobs, improve schools, and encourage vital partnerships between educational institutions and local businesses. 95 East Dougherty Street, Suite 202, Athens, GA 30603 ★ (706) 546-9061.

## Publications


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Stern, Joyce D., ed. *The Condition of Education in Rural Schools.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1994.



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